Sections
Focus
Columns and Reviews
Consulting
Training
News & Announcements

Archives
Browse past issues of Praxis

About Us
About Us

Submissions
Submit an article to Praxis

Home » Archives » Spring 2007 (Volume 4 Issue 2) - The Writing Center and the Classroom

The Give and Take of Tutoring on Location

Spring 2007 / Focus

by ***Steven J. Corbett****, University of Washington*

Peer power and authority in classroom-based writing tutoring

Steven J. Corbett

Curriculum- or classroom-based writing tutoring (CBT) programs are well-established writing across the curriculum components in some of the most prestigious colleges across the country. The 2005 collection *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring* highlights various theoretical and practical issues involved in CBT, and Margot Soven's 2006 *What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know* is the first book to combine information on training tutors for work in either writing centers or CBT programs. But just as all writing centers are not alike, CBT programs differ from institution to institution. There is much flexibility in and between models. This flexibility is due to the various needs and desires of the students, tutors, instructors, and program administrators: some programs do not ask tutors to comment on student papers; some programs make visits to tutors optional, while others make them mandatory; and some programs offer hybrids of both approaches. Behind all these methodological and practical choices also lie complex theoretical issues of power/authority, collaborative control/flexibility, and process/product. For example, Jean Marie Lutes argues that "the [writing fellows] program complicates the peer relationship between fellows and students; when fellows comment on drafts, they inevitably write not only for their immediate audience (the student writers), but also for their future audience (the professor)" (239). Issues like these and others brought up in CBT research and practice led me to begin investigating some of the differences between various models.

In this essay I will lay out the state of the field in CBT. I will explain how CBT draws on various models of peer education in its theory and practice, providing examples of models and comparing and assessing their respective strengths and weaknesses. I will also provide a sense of some of the critical questions, debates and challenges–especially issues of power and authority–that make

CBT an exciting area for both practice and research.

The Classroom/Center Debate

Those of us theorizing, practicing, and advocating CBT, then, must remain wary of the sorts of power and authority issues that might potentially undermine an important aspect of the traditional one-to-one tutorial.

In 1984 Stephen North's essay "The Idea of a Writing Center" expressed the frustrations many writing center practitioners felt about centers being seen as proofreading, or grammar fix-it shops, or as otherwise subservient to the writing classroom. In his polemic, North spelled out what came to be a much-repeated phrase: "our job is to produce better writers, not better writing" (69). But North's vehemence would also draw a theoretical and practical dividing line between "we" in the center and "them" in the classroom where "we are not here to serve, supplement, back up, complement, reinforce, or otherwise be defined by any external curriculum" (72). This question of authority and writing center autonomy would stir up a series of arguments both for and against closer classroom/center relations. Louise Smith would assert in 1986 that "the idea of the 'center' has gotten in the way" of productive writing center/classroom choreographies (22). Muriel Harris encouraged the call for closer center/classroom collaboration in 1990. That same year Thomas Hemmeter, pointing to the fact that writing center practitioners and compositionists share many of the same pedagogical beliefs and practices, noted that "the writing center always contains within itself this trace of the classroom" (43). And in 1994 North himself did an about-face when he revisited his earlier polemic with a much more even-tempered acknowledgment of the need for closer relationships between classroom and center. Though encouraging this sort of two-way street between classroom and center, Mary Soliday in 1995, Teagan Decker in 2005, and Soven in 2006 have all drawn on Harvey Kail and John Trimbur's 1987 essay to remind us that the center is often that place just removed enough from the power structures of the classroom to enable students to engage in critical questioning of the "seemingly untouchable expectations, goals and motivations of the power structures" within which undergraduates must learn (Decker 22). Those of us theorizing, practicing, and advocating CBT, then, must remain wary of the sorts of power and authority issues that might potentially undermine an important aspect of the traditional one-to-one tutorial. These same issues of authority–which touch importantly on things like trust, which determines whether the tutor and tutee can rely on one another–come into play in the various "parent initiatives" that inform the theory and practice of the instructional hybrid that is CBT (Spigelman and Grobman 6). Spigelman and Grobman refer to these initiates as "parents" perhaps because they have played generative roles in the birth of CBT programs, and continue to theoretically and practically nurture their continuing development. We will look at three of the most influential parent initiatives: writing center tutoring, writing fellows, and writing groups.

Writing Center Tutoring

Writing center tutoring is the most obvious parent to start with. Harris, Kenneth Bruffee, and North (above) have pointed to perhaps the key ingredients that make writing center tutoring an important part of a writing curriculum. Harris has helped many compositionists see that the "professional choice" of doing or supporting writing center work (especially the idea of fellow students tutoring

their peers) can add much to both students' and teachers' understanding of how writers think and learn. Harris compiled and presented a summary of the hundreds of student evaluations, overwhelmingly positive, she had received over twenty years at Purdue's Writing Lab in the 1995 "Why Writers Need Writing Tutors." She uses students' own words to show how one-to-ones: (1) encourage student independence in collaborative talk; the talk with a less-judgmental and non-grading tutor can free students from the yoke of "presentational talk" and steer them toward more productive "exploratory talk" (31); (2) assist students with metacognitive acquisition of strategic knowledge; tutors sitting side-by-side listening and talking with a student help "the student recognize what's going on and how to talk about it as well as how to act" (34) and assist with knowledge of how to interpret, translate, and apply assignments and teacher comments; (3) assist with affective concerns; talking through their writing can relieve writing anxiety, and enhance students' confidence and motivation.

Bruffee makes grand claims for the role of peer tutoring in institutional change, arguing that peer tutors have the ability to translate at the boundaries between the knowledge communities students belong to and the knowledge communities they aspire to join. Students will internalize the conversation of the community they want to join so they can call on it on their own. This mediating role, he believes, can bring about "changes in the prevailing understanding of the nature and authority of knowledge and the authority of teachers" (110). But this theoretical idea of the ground-shaking institutional change that can be brought about by peer tutoring runs into some practical problems when we consider just how deeply entrenched the power and authority of, say, the classroom instructor really is.

Writing Fellows Programs

The question of just how and to what degree peer tutoring might affect the power dynamics of the classroom leads us straight into considerations of writing fellows programs. Writing Fellows Programs, like the ones at the **University of Wisconsin, Madison** , and **Brown University** typically pair up a peer writing tutor with a professor in a discipline to help integrate writing into the curriculum (often in a course that might not normally use writing extensively). As Jean Marie Lutes observed (above), the fact that writing fellows comment on student drafts of papers and then meet one-to-one with students, sometimes without even attending class or even doing the same readings as the students, raises questions about power, authority, and tutor-tutee-teacher relationships. Trimbur, drawing on Bruffee's idea of "little teachers," warned practitioners of the problem of treating peer tutors as para- or pre-professionals and to recognize "that their community is not necessarily ours" (294). Bruffee and Trimbur worry that the collaborative effect of peership, the positive effects of working closer perhaps to the student's Vygotskyan zone of proximal development (or the level of problem solving ability just out of reach of the student, but attainable with the aid of a capable peer), will be lost if tutors are trained to be too teacherly.

[S]tudent anxiety around issues of plagiarism and autonomous originality, or the author as creator and sole owner of an idea, are hard to dispel.

Two essays written on the Writing Fellows Program at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, one by an assistant professor and writing center director,

Jean Marie Lutes, the other by a peer tutor, Jennifer Corroy, point to some interesting conflicts in authority. Lutes's essay examines a reflective essay written by a fellow in which the fellow, Jill, describes an instance of being accosted by another fellow for "helping an oppressive academy to stifle a student's creative voice" (243). Jill defends her role as peer tutor just trying to pass on a repertoire of strategies and skills that would foster her peer's creativity. Lutes goes on to argue that in their role as writing fellows, tutors are more concerned with living up to the role of "ideal tutor" than whether or not they have become complicit in an institutional system of rigid conventional indoctrination. In an instance of how knowing the professor's goals can produce a controlling force in a one-to-one interaction, another fellow, Helen, reports how she resorted to a more directive style of tutoring when she noticed students getting closer to the professor's expectations. Helen concluded that this more intimate knowledge of the professor's expectations, once she "knew the answer" (250 n.18), made her job harder rather than easier to negotiate.

Jennifer Corroy's essay, describes working with a professor in English who disclosed his views of fellows as "tools" that saved him time in marking papers and meeting with students for conferences, while his views of teaching writing, in his own words, did not "make me reflect globally on teaching or on writing" (215). Unfortunately, this professor saw fellows in a utilitarian light, and was perhaps unwilling to reflect on his own pedagogy. Clearly, as these cases report, the issue of changing classroom teaching practices and philosophies (to say nothing of institutional change) may be a somewhat more complicated notion than Bruffee suggests.

Peer Writing Groups and Peer Response

The issues don't get any less complex when we turn to writing groups. In her essay "Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration," Harris compares peer response groups and peer tutoring. Since students, unlike tutors, have not been trained in the art of peer response, how can they be expected to give adequate responses when put into groups, especially if the student is a first-year or an otherwise inexperienced academic writer? How can we help "our students experience and reap the benefits of both forms of collaboration?" (381).

CBT draws primarily on three parent models that both enrich and complicate its theory and practice.

Programs like Penn State, Berks, have answered Wendy Bishop's call from 1988 to be "willing to experiment" (124) with peer response group work. There, tutors are sent into classrooms to help move students toward meta-awareness of how to tutor each other. In effect, they become tutor trainers, coaching fellow students on strategies to employ while responding to a peer's paper. But student anxiety around issues of plagiarism and autonomous originality, or the author as creator and sole owner of an idea, are hard to dispel. Candace Spigelman suggests that students need to know how the collaborative generation of ideas differs from plagiarism. If students can understand how and why authors appropriate ideas, they may be more willing to experiment with collaborative writing ("The Ethics of Appropriation"). It follows, then, that tutors, who are adept at these collaborative writing negotiations, can direct fellow students toward understanding the difference. But as with all the issues we've been exploring so far, the issue of the appropriation of ideas is, as Harris suggests, a sticky one indeed. In a more recent essay, Spigelman, drawing on

Grimm and Lunsford, comments on the desires of basic writers interacting with peer group leaders who look to the tutor as surrogate teacher ("Reconstructing Authority"). She relates that no matter how hard the tutors tried to displace their roles as authority figures, the basic writers inevitably complained about not getting enough grammar instruction, or lack of explicit directions. When, on the other hand, a tutor tried to be more directive and teacherly, students resisted her efforts at control as well. Spigelman relates how she also experiences similar reactions from students. She concludes that "if we want our students to experience nonhierarchical forms of learning, we will need to make explicit what is at stake in this effort" (204). But can this explicit meta-awareness in itself really help mitigate the deep sociocultural force of student desire and dependence on teacher authority? Spigelman's own accounts, as well as the accounts of the tutors above, suggest that it is no easy job to work toward restructuring authority in the writing classroom.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to outline the state of the field in CBT. CBT draws primarily on three parent models that both enrich and complicate its theory and practice. Writing center tutoring offers important guidelines and debates regarding directive and nondirective approaches in peer teaching, and considerations of the affective in peer pedagogy. Writing fellows programs complicate issues of authority and interpersonal relations, and raise interesting questions regarding process versus product. Peer writing groups bring up complex issues of appropriation and collaborative dependence and interdependence. All three parent models of peer education offer valuable checks and balances when considering what models to employ with specific programs, tutors, and student populations.

In my current research I see tutors, instructors, students, and administrators involved in dynamic negotiations of all three of these parent models of CBT on a daily basis. I am studying the comparative value added by having tutors attached to four sections of first-year composition with multicultural and non-traditional students. Two sections have tutors in-class on a day-to-day basis, participating in classroom conversations. The other two sections have tutors acting as writing fellows, visiting only to help facilitate peer response on writing, and commenting on essays. Both models have students meet one-to-one with their peer tutors. Some of the same questions of dependence on tutor authority we suggested with Spigelman and Lunsford, and issues of directive/nondirective tutoring and writing process versus product we discussed with Lutes and Corroy, are surfacing in interviews, field observations, and informal discussions with participants. Both models have their strengths and weaknesses, and much has to do with individual participants' preferences, teaching philosophies, and attitudes. For example, one teacher using the writing fellows model seems to not really see much potential value in having a tutor visit for peer review, so she has chosen not to utilize her tutor for this. Another teacher using the in-class-every-day model finds her and her tutor's approaches fundamentally different in terms of skills/critical thinking emphases. Practical, context-specific negotiations take place every day, and sometimes it is hard to please all participants all the time. But the critical questions raised by CBT, the ways the various amalgamations of the parent initiatives have the potential to complicate and enrich writing center *and* classroom pedagogy, are worth the inevitable give and take involved.

Works Cited

Barnett, Robert W., and Jacob S. Blumner, eds. *The Allyn and Bacon Guide to Writing Center Theory and Practice*. Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2001.

Bishop, Wendy. "Helping Peer Writing Groups Succeed." *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* 15 (1988): 120-25.

Bruffee, Kenneth A. *Collaborative Learning: Higher Education, Interdependence, and the Authority of Knowledge*. 2nd ed. Baltimore: The John Hopkins UP, 1999 [1993].

Corroy, Jennifer. "Institutional Change and the University of Wisconsin–Madison Writing Fellows Program." Spigelman and Grobman 205-18.

Decker, Teagan. "Diplomatic Relations: Peer Tutors in the Writing Classroom." Spigelman and Grobman 17-30.

Harris, Muriel. "Collaboration Is Not Collaboration Is Not Collaboration: Writing Center vs. Peer-Response Groups." *College Composition and Communication* 43 (1992): 369-83.

_____. "Talking in the Middle: Why Writers Need Writing Tutors." *College English* 57.1 (Jan. 1995): 27-42.

_____. "What's Up and What's In: Trends and Traditions in Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 11.1 (1990): 15-25.

Hemmeter, Thomas. "The 'Smack of Difference': The Language of Writing Center Discourse." *The Writing Center Journal* 11.1 (1990): 35-48.

Kail, Harvey, and John Trimbur. "The Politics of Peer Tutoring." *The Writing Center Journal* 11.1-2 (1987): 5-12.

Lutes, Jean Marie. "Why Feminists Make Better Tutors: Gender and Disciplinary Expertise in a Curriculum-Based Tutoring Program." *Writing Center Research: Extending the Conversation*. Eds. Paula Gillespie, Alice Gillam, Lady Falls Brown, and Byron Stay. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002. 235-57.

North, Steven M. "Revisiting the Idea of a Writing Center." Barnett and Blumner 79-91.

_____. "The Idea of a Writing Center." Barnett and Blumner 63-78.

Smith, Louise Z. "Independence and Collaboration: Why We Should Decentralize Writing Centers." *The Writing Center Journal* 23.2 (2003): 15-23. [7.1 (1986): 3-10].

Soliday, Mary. "Shifting Roles in Classroom Tutoring: Cultivating the Art of Boundary Crossing." *The Writing Center Journal* 16.1 (1995): 59-73.

Soven, Margot Iris. *What the Writing Tutor Needs to Know*. Boston, MA: Thomson/ Wadsworth, 2006.

Spigelman, Candace. "Reconstructing Authority: Negotiating Power in Democratic Learning Sites." Spigelman and Grobman 185-204.

_____. "The Ethics of Appropriation in Peer Writing Groups." *Perspectives on Plagiarism and Intellectual Property in a Postmodern World*. Eds. Lise Buranen,

and Alice M. Roy. Albany: SUNY UP, 1999. 231-40.

Spigelman, Candace and Laurie Grobman, eds. *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*. Logan: Utah State UP, 2005.

Spigelman, Candace, and Laurie Grobman. "Introduction: On Location in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring." Spigelman and Grobman 1-13.

Trimbur, John. "Peer Tutoring: A Contradiction in Terms?" Barnett and Blumner 288-95.

Steven J. Corbett is a doctoral candidate in English (Language and Rhetoric) and assistant director of **the Expository Writing Program at the University of Washington, Seattle**. His essays on writing centers and the writing classroom have recently appeared in *The Writing Lab Newsletter*, *Academic Exchange Quarterly*, and the collection *On Location: Theory and Practice in Classroom-Based Writing Tutoring*. He is currently working on his dissertation, a qualitative research study of two models of classroom-based writing tutoring with non-mainstream and multicultural students in four sections of first-year composition.

‹ The First-Year Composition Requirement: An Important Introduction to the Writing Center **up** **Fall 2006 (Volume 4 Issue 1) - Beyond the University ›**